



Staff photos by John Metzger

The plane parking area is crowded as contestants await the signal to take off for the flying of the thirtieth and last Powder Puff Derby.

Powder Puff pilots head east on final derby

By JAN CLEVELAND

Sun-Telegram Staff Writer

PALM SPRINGS — AWTAR.

To most people the acronym means nothing. But to a select group of women pilots it inspires dreams of flying off into the blue yonder in an all-woman transcontinental air race (AWTAR) known as the Powder Puff Derby.

Some 325 women in 140 planes did just that Friday morning, ignoring the desert heat to take off from here, in what officials said, for the second year in a row, is their final derby.

The race, which follows the route of the original derby in 1947, got off to a slow start with the first plane leaving about half an hour after the scheduled 8 a.m. take-off time. All went smoothly until about the 20th plane.

That aircraft, a Piper Cruiser,

locked a brake and rolled off the end of the runway in a ground loop. Pilot Vivienne Schrank of Jordon, Mont., and co-pilot Pearl Laska of Hinton, W. Va., were not hurt. But their plane's landing gear was damaged and it was scratched from the race.

After that, with momentary pauses for the landing and taking off of the huge jetliners that regularly serve the Palm Springs Airport, the smaller derby planes taxied in an orderly line out to the runway and took off on the first leg of the trip that will take them to Tampa, Fla., by July 4.

As the pilots steered their way through the rows of parked planes still waiting their turn, they waved and shouted happily to friends.

"That's really what this is all about — friends. There's such a strong feeling when you see your friends

taxiing down that runway and taking off," said Patricia Udall, a pilot from Kayenta, Ariz.

As she spoke, her co-pilot pulled a big, stuffed Snoopy dog from its perch on the propeller of Udall's plane. The dog was decked with an old-time flying cap, goggles and various pins and medals.

"He's been my mascot for years," grinned Nan Gaylord from Denver, Colo.

As Gaylord climbed into the plane, Udall lamented the end of the Powder Puff Derby.

"It really upsets me that this is the last one. And this one isn't even a race. You know, it's not so much the racing that's important, but just finishing it and being with your friends," she said.

Powder Puff Derby officials had said the 29th race in 1976 would be the final one because fuel costs were getting too high and air traffic was increasing to the point where safe racing was becoming more difficult.

But the Smithsonian Institution wanted to include the derby in its aviation memorabilia. To do that, the race had to be run continuously for 30 years, so Smithsonian officials asked the derby officials to hold one more.

So this year's second final race was scheduled and derby officials decided to relax their usually strict rules just a little. They also decided this 30th derby would not be a race. The pilots will compete occasionally along the way, but the competition will involve solving crossword puzzles and picking out locations on the ground that match photographs they will be given.

Because of the relaxed entry rules, planes that would not usually be able to enter were allowed. Seventy-year old Melba Beard of Scottsdale, Ariz., was flying one — a 48-year old Brunner Winkle Bird.

A what? The Brunner is a bi-plane with a cockpit that has no cover. Since Beard was flying solo, she had to sit in the rear seat of the breezy plane to keep its center of gravity on an even keel.

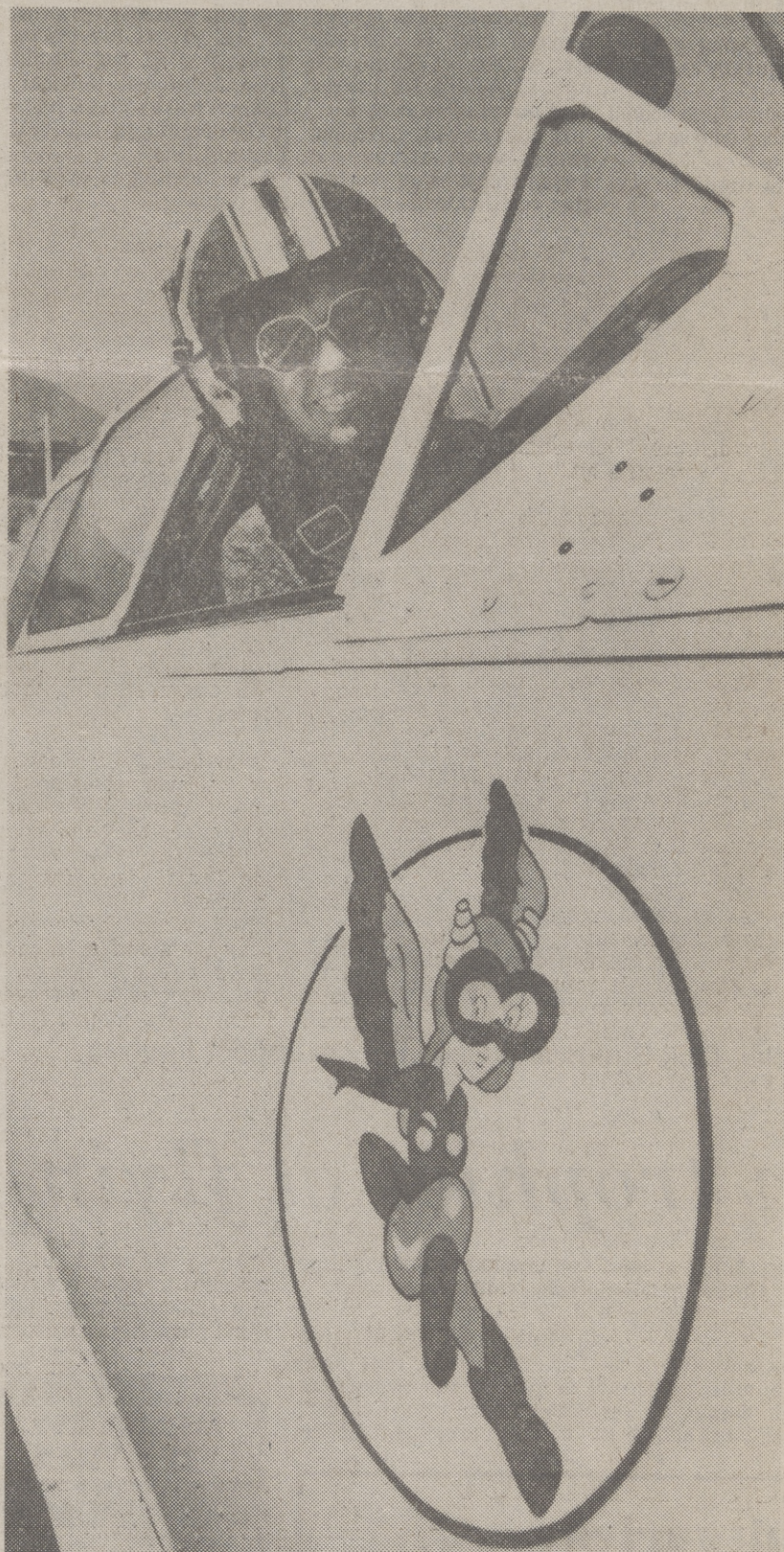
The eye-catching craft was painted a dazzling bright red and appeared to be well cared for by its pilot, who does her own mechanical work. Beard has logged nearly 3,500 hours in flight.

"This plane is a 48-year old antique. This is the type of plane that was in the first derby and I think it's important that there be one in this last derby," Beard said, sitting in the cockpit and adjusting her flier's cap.

"This is the oldest plane in the race, but it won't make it to Tampa," she predicted.

"I don't know how far I'll go. I have to baby it along if I want to keep it, and I do want to keep it," she said. A brief smile crossing her face as she watched the constantly changing group of people that

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Sue Parish sits at the controls of her World War II Navy Trainer.

Pilots . . .

(Continued from Metro)

always seemed to be watching her and taking her picture.

Sue Parish of Kalamazoo, Mich., was also flying one of the older and more unusual planes in the race. Her's was a P-40 that had been modified for use as an advanced trainer during World War II. Her plane also showed signs of loving care with its shiny paint job in almost rainbow hues.

"I just love to fly. I've flown everything from PT-17s and Stinsons to a Lear Jet. My favorite is — well, they'll all my favorites. But I really love the older planes," Parish said, making a final re-organization of her luggage compartment.

Her P-40 was probably one of the slower planes in the race, along with Beard's plane.

"It will probably take me 15 minutes to get to 9,500 feet where I'll fly and it will be about a 3½-hour trip to El Paso," she said.

With her take-off time approaching, Parish, an air transport pilot with 4,600 hours flying time, climbed into the cockpit and donned her pink and white helmet and black gloves.

"I always have to wear gloves because there are so many things in here for me to chip my nails on," she said, grinning.

As her engine came to life with a full-throated roar, a look of sheer delight crossed her face. She slowly taxied out to the runway, blowing kisses to airport officials and zig-zagging her "tail-dragger" plane from side to side to allow her to see over its nose.

It took several hours, but finally all the pilots were on their way to their first stop at either Tucson, Ariz., an optional stop for refueling, or El Paso, Tex. The fliers must stay overnight at El Paso and Dallas, Tex. From there, they will fly on to Tampa via Shreveport, La.; Jackson, Miss.; Monroeville, Ala., and Thomasville, Ga.

Planes must arrive in Tampa by 6 p.m. EDT on July 4. Winners of the various contests will be announced at a final banquet July 6.